



Using Films

Another great student project is to watch a film from the time depicting similar themes as those in FSA photographs. An interesting film to watch is *Our Daily Bread*. Student can write essays comparing the film to the FSA photos. What are the similarities? How do the images differ? Are there themes common to both? After writing their essays, students can have a discussion about the film and their analyses of the film and FSA photos.

Our Daily Bread (1934), directed by King Vidor, tells the story of a couple's quest to turn an abandoned farm into an agricultural collective. The film's main characters are John and Mary Sims, who are months behind on their rent. John is unemployed and can't get an interview. They decide to leave the city to work on an abandoned farm given to them by Mary's uncle. While they do not have any farming experience, they hope to compensate with their enthusiasm. A few days after arriving at the farm, they begin to realize how little they know about farming. Then a Swedish farmer and his family, who are fixing a flat tire near their gate, appear. When John learns that they lost their farm, he invites them to come live on the farm. In exchange for their farming knowledge, they can stay there for free. Shortly, the two couples begin to make progress on the farm. This gives John an idea. He will put up a string of signs along the road by the farm, like the old Burma Shave ads, that call for unemployed tradesmen to join them. In exchange for their work, they will get a place to live and an opportunity to share in the proceeds from the farm. Then in a steady stream come a plumber, carpenter, blacksmith, stone mason, barber, merchant, shoemaker, undertaker, ex-convict, lawyer, politician, cigar salesman and violinist. It is a microcosm of the Great Depression. Soon they've formed a communal cooperative with everyone working together for the common good.

Capturing the problems and daily life of a subsistence farm for unemployed men from the cities, this film stands as a statement of social cinema. The formation of a collective farm and its growth as a community of the unemployed is a drama of idealism that was unique during the time of the Great Depression. When the sheriff attempts to sell the farm at public auction, the community saves the day by excluding outside bids and obtaining the deed for pennies, mirroring real life events. At one point, the Swedish farmer laughs at John's inexperience in farming. He catches him in the act of throwing away some "weeds" that turn out to be carrots. In reality, even many relocated farmers were not always familiar with what were weeds in the new areas they were farming.

Successful irrigation was vital to resettlement farmers, but fewer than 10% of the farmers had irrigated previously. To go from dry land cultivation to irrigation farming required a change in traditional beliefs about water and farm management. Farmers had to learn time-consuming irrigation techniques, as well as the responsibilities with those who shared the water. Irrigation was supposed to make diversification possible including production for both home consumption and the market. Eventually, the farm grows to include both the skilled and unskilled. John doesn't have the heart to turn anybody away, including a pants presser, an undertaker, a professor and a bank robber, who truly believes in the commune. In fact the bank robber decides to turn himself in so that the \$500 reward will go to the farm. They are soon joined by Sally, who just regards the farm as a temporary place to crash, until something better turns up.

Ultimately problems begin to develop, including drought and failed crops. The cooperative is unable to get a bank loan and must struggle along. John becomes despondent and takes off with Sally. Eventually John pulls himself together and returns in time to supervise construction of an irrigation ditch to the farm. *Our Daily Bread* was unique in the Great Depression as it was one of only a small number of films that addressed social issues. It is about a communal farm and its tribulations. King Vidor said he got the idea from an article by Malcolm McDermott entitled "An Agricultural Army" in *Readers' Digest*, in which the author proposes cooperatives as the solution to unemployment.

The idea of moving back to the land was not an idle idea during the Depression. In the early 1930s there were more migrations to the country than from the country to urban areas. In 1933, a realtor's ad in the *Wall Street Journal* even proclaimed "Buy an abandoned farm and live on trout and applejack until the upturn." The film is an example of King Vidor's preference for the simple virtues of rural life. The film shows farm life as opposed to atomistic city life. It also contrasts community with the dehumanizing and competitive life of the city as portrayed in Vidor's earlier film, *The Crowd*. It also depicts a community of varying nationalities and talents, the American idea of the melting pot. It shows the possibility of how land can be held in common and everyone shares the work. The film is also an idealization of work, i.e. "getting the job done" is the story. There is no sense of competition or capitalistic ethos in the film and it finds fault with both socialism and democracy. Unable to secure Hollywood backing, Vidor wrote, produced and financed the picture himself, with last minute assistance from Charlie Chaplin. United Artists, a company founded by Chaplin and run as a cooperative by directors and actors who wanted an outlet for their works, released the film. It was a film made outside studio control with a cast of mostly nonprofessionals, many of them unemployed men from the streets of Los Angeles. Average films at the time ran \$300,000 to \$500,000. *Our Daily Bread* cost about \$125,000. To save money, the irrigation ditch digging scene was done without sound. The frantic attempt of the men is shot artfully, creating a visual rhythm as the workers, with shovels and picks, dig the irrigation ditch in the hard, dry earth. The sight of the men working together with shovels and picks is a quintessential New Deal iconographic image. The scene took

ten days to film and used Mack Sennet stunt men. It was filmed on the United Studios back lot. King Vidor did write to Stephen Early, Roosevelt's Press Secretary, hoping to perhaps get the President's endorsement to *Our Daily Bread*, but Early held firm to the policy of not endorsing any commercial film. Vidor hoped that Roosevelt would see the connection between his film and the subsistence homesteads planned by the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration and make an exception. Vidor wrote:

“I have felt since I first planned to do this picture two years ago that the idea projected was in accord with the President's plan of subsistence homesteads ... Even entertainment can carry an amount of propaganda and educational element. I deeply feel the screen to be the greatest power of exploitation and I cannot wholly ignore a social consciousness in producing a picture.”

It is one of a few films to portray the impact of the Great Depression on working-class Americans. The film earned second prize at a film festival in Moscow, the Soviet International Exposition on Film. It also won an award from the League of Nations “for its contribution to humanity.” Some critics saw the film as too political. The *Los Angeles Times* refused to advertise it. The Hearst press called it “pinko.” The *Nation* called it a travesty. And a headline in a Paris newspaper even said, “King Vidor prefers food to sex.”

Hollywood in the 1930s was synonymous with the film industry, producing 3/4th of the world's motion picture footage and perhaps as many as 5,000 films came out of Hollywood. During the Depression, a higher percentage of the population went to the cinema each week than any time since. In 1930 weekly movie attendance was 80 million people, approximately 65% of the US population. But in 1933 one third of all movie theaters closed. Weekly movie attendance declined from 1930 to 1934. But attendance was up to 85 million in 1939. Nearly 83 cents of every dollar spent on recreation in the 1930s was for movies. At the beginning of the decade, movie admission prices ranged from 25 cents to 50 cents. With the Depression, admission went to a dime for a neighborhood theater and a quarter for the bigger movie palaces. Theaters switched to a new format, the double feature, with the second movie called a “B” movie. Some theaters also showed a cartoon, newsreel, a serial and maybe a short documentary. They also had “dish night” (now called Depression glass) when cheap glassware or crockery was given away to lucky ticket holders. Some theaters also had Bank Night or Bingo as well as other promotions. Popcorn and candy were introduced in the 1930s to make more money. The films of the 1930s are known for escapism, laughing away the Depression and making the world a happier place to live. Hollywood was known as “The Dream Factory.” Hollywood in the 1930s was involved with myth making, celebrating small towns, the importance of home, family, and traditional values of neighborliness, generosity and belonging. They also promoted the idea that love will conquer class lines and that tomorrow will be another day. Depression-era films included the following genres: gangster, police and G-men, westerns, musicals, screwball comedy, fantasy,

horror and science fiction, adolescent films and Disney animation. Depression films did remember the depression. The Mickey Mouse cartoon *Moving Day* features Donald and Goofy, who are evicted after falling six months behind on rent. *Stand Up and Cheer* was Shirley Temple's first feature film, in which FDR appoints a Secretary of Amusement. FDR watched as many as three to four movies per week. Warner Theaters and the Motion Picture Producer Distributor Association provided films gratis. Roosevelt never endorsed films or allowed any promotional use of his viewing, but Eleanor did write about films in her columns.

There are other films besides *Our Daily Bread* that portray the Great Depression. Students could choose another film to watch and write a report comparing it to FSA photographs.